We All Pretend To Be the Heroes on the Good Side (But What If We're the Villains on the Other?)

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this oneshot is not for you, Implied/Referenced Abuse, Implied/Referenced Neglect, Gaslighting, Emotional/Psychological Abuse, Emotional Manipulation, Past Abuse, That's a yikes from me bro, update: my friend who knows how to throw knives looked over that bit and it's alright

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We All Pretend To Be the Heroes on the Good Side (But What If We're the Villains on the Other?)

by Ghosts_Multiversal_Mindsoup

Summary

Died, last night in my dreams,
Walking the streets, of some old ghost town
Time was thrown at the wind

And now I'm searching for trust,
In a city of rust
A city of vampires

The war hammer felt unnaturally heavy in his hands. Still, he held it up and prepared for battle.

Though... he couldn't ease the weight in his SOUL.

—

Blue is sick of Ink and Dream running around without considering that he isn't basically immortal (or actually immortal, in Ink's case). Blue can't keep up with them, he just can't.

So he tries his luck with Nightmare's Gang.

Notes

Tw: implied/referenced abuse, gaslighting, emotional and psychological manipulation for a few sections. Implied neglect and borderline abuse for the entire oneshot.

(Story inspired by this comic dub, title is from this song, and summary lyrics are from this song. Go check them all out!)

See the end of the work for more notes

Blue stood before the mangled gates, with only the clothes on his back and a duffle bag. He sighed.

Honestly? He really didn't think he'd ever be in this situation, or that it would ever end this way. Or that he'd ever wake up to the lies.

(And that Dream... that Ink...)

Still, Blue took a deep breath. Nothing can change the past, all he can do is control the present, and maybe even alter the future in the process. Summoning all his courage, the short skeleton pushed the black gate open.

It creaked inward, but otherwise didn't protest. Blue took a step forward, ready for the worst.

(Though, he forgot to prepare himself for the best.)

———

Nightmare's tentacle flicked absently, and Blue really couldn't tell if he was agitated or just thinking.

"You want... to join?"

Blue nodded without noise, having swallowed his (non-existent) tongue anxiously minutes ago.

A few more moments of tense silence, Nightmare hummed lightly, shrugging.

"...I don't see why not. Hell, what's the worst that could happen." He stood up, reaching a (partially) goopy hand out for Blue to shake. "Welcome aboard."

Hesitantly, Blue took Nightmare's hand, feeling lucky that he was still wearing his gloves. "...Thanks?"

You brought me on, just like that? Nothing about being a spy or fraternizing with the enemy? What about the cruel and sadistic leader that Ink and Dream had drilled into him? Blue couldn't help but think; though, he didn't tell Nightmare.

Speaking of the nightmare king, he was heading for the door, motioning for Blue to follow him. The latter did, standing up and taking his few possessions with him.

"Let's get you a room, shall we? After all, my subordinates stay here, *all* of them." Blue stammered at Nightmare's explanation, unsure if he really meant it.

What about the rest of his gang? What about briefing me on the rules and expectations? What about the next mission?

However, instead of voicing his concerns, Blue held his (again, non-existent) tongue. He nodded quickly.

"Good. Follow me, you wouldn't want to get lost now."

Blue complied, anxiously fiddling with the strap of his bag.

I'm sure... That I'll understand in the morning.

He stole a quick glance at his new leader (boss?).

Or at least, I hope so. I really hope so.

———

"It's late, get some rest. I'll tell the others in the morning, so don't be afraid to sleep in." Nightmare rumbled.

"I'll lay down ground rules in the morning too, after you wake up. So don't worry about that either." He had a knowing look, and Blue felt a shiver trail down his spine.

"Oh, and Horror is cooking breakfast, I'll make sure to save a plate for you."

It was... nice?

The room before Blue was clean and tidy. It was spacious with a big window on one wall, plush furniture filled the room. It had a bed, desk in the corner, and two bookshelves against one wall which were sparsely filled with books (with a small table and a comfortable looking armchair, as well?)

Blue honestly couldn't believe this was all real.

He then remembered that Nightmare had said something, and he nodded quickly, still dazed. Blue hoped that the other wouldn't berate him for not listening. Instead, Nightmare smiled slightly—though Blue didn't catch it—before closing the door softly.

Outside, Nightmare stared at the once unoccupied room. He rested a

hand on the solid wood door, eye socket closed slightly, concerned.

"Why were you so surprised?" Was all he muttered before turning away to retire for the night as well.

———

Blue blinked blearily awake. Groaning, he sat up, holding his aching skull. "Urgh... What..?"

Why was he so tired again?

After a few more seconds, the panic set in. He overslept again, Ink was going to drag him everywhere without breakfast, *again*. And then Blue would have no one to blame but himself.

But... As Blue took a look around the room, he didn't recognize anything. He wasn't at base anymore. And he didn't hear the loud chaos that indicated his teammates.

Then, more panic. If he wasn't at base, where *was* he?? Blue's eyelights darted around erratically, trying to find something familiar. Finally, he spotted his duffle bag—half unpacked on the table.

Right. He's in Nightmare's castle, sleeping in one of the rooms. He joined the Bad Guy Gang, leaving Dream and Ink behind.

"I'll tell the gang in the morning, so don't be afraid to sleep in."

Don't be afraid to sleep in, huh? Blue contemplated the bed he was sitting up in. His eye lights darted to the analog clock on the nightstand besides the bed.

7:14 AM

Well, it *had* been a while since he was able to sleep in more than a half hour or so. And... a few more hours certainly wouldn't hurt. Right?

Blue turned over, eye sockets already sliding closed. He would deal with whatever Nightmare had in store later.

His last thought before the darkness of unconsciousness enveloped him was a small, but overwhelmingly terrified thought, *what* did *Nightmare mean by 'sleeping in', exactly? When was he even supposed to be up?* (As well as a hope that whatever Nightmare *did* end up doing would be worth the rest.)

———

"Really, Boss? Blue??" Killer exclaimed, more surprised than angry.

"Yeah, are you *sure* it's him? The one we've been fighting against for, like, forever??" Dust butt in, leaning on the dinner table with a fork in hand. "Like, he seems nice n all, but, I don' think he'd join us. Y'know?"

Horror jumped up from his seat, "Yeah! It could be like... a fake Blue! An imposter!!"

Error scoffed. "Y-Yeah right. L-Like Dream and-nd I-Ink could think about-out something o-other than th-*themselves* for mo-more than t-two sec-c-conds t-to come up with so-something like tha-that."

Killer snickered but otherwise didn't add on. Dust, on the other hand, nodded, using his fork to shovel more spaghetti into his mouth (which, for some reason, he always wanted for breakfast. And Nightmare wasn't one to stop him—as long as he actually ate.)

Nightmare rolled his eyelight. "Yes it's him, I know it's him. And he'll be awake soon, so be nice to him. He's one of our own now, he's not our enemy. Not anymore."

They all nodded, including Cross who was strangely silent (and shooting murderous glares at the empty seat across from him). "Righto Boss!" Killer enthusiastically said, fake saluting.

———

Blue crept quietly down the stairs, wincing everytime the old wood creaked. Nightmare had kindly put a map in his room (he still hasn't gotten used to 'owning' a room in the castle. He didn't think he ever would, if he was being honest), and Blue was trying to sneak into the dining room without attracting attention from anyone.

(He was also hoping to avoid Nightmare as much as he could. He panicked earlier when he woke up, as it was almost 10 AM. He shouldn't have slept in, he shouldn't have pushed his luck.)

Blue was mostly successful, as he didn't bump into anyone—that was until he walked into the dining room for whatever was left of breakfast (would it be considered brunch at this point?). Unfortunately, Blue walked straight into Nightmare and Cross arguing.

It was actually quite off-putting to see. The two were fighting, but

there wasn't any malice between them. It only confused Blue, as they never *seemed* like friends on the battlefield, yet here they were, fighting without venom. Just like friends.

"Cross. You have to eat something! I don't care what it is, you just need some magic in your system." Nightmare grumbled, flicking the other's forehead with a tentacle.

"No! I really don't see what the big deal is, honestly!" Cross retorted back, pouting and half-heartedly swatting Nightmare away.

Blue took a moment to weigh the pros and cons. On one hand, he might be able to sneak by without either of them noticing. It was risky, but it was definitely the option he preferred. On the other hand... Wasn't this why he left? He *hated* feeling like he was walking on eggshells. Feeling like any attention would be bad, whether he deserved it or not.

Internally, he was punching at the walls in frustration. Why couldn't these small, meaningless, decisions just be *easy* for once in his goddamn life!?

Blue sighed, making up his mind. Clearing his (non-existent) throat loudly, he stepped closer to the bickering pair. "Uh, h-hi."

Immediately, Nightmare's posture softened as he turned towards him. "Oh, Blue. I'm glad you're awake. Have you come to get breakfast?"

Blue nervously fidgeted, unsure exactly what to say. "Y-Yeah! I was just... gonna get... some... food..."

A few moments of awkward silence.

"Okay, bye!" And with that, he quickly dashed into the kitchen. Blue could feel their eyelights on his back. He did his best to ignore them.

Once he was safely out of sight, he collapsed against the nearest wall.

It's a start. You didn't die, you didn't get yelled at, you're alright.

Even though it felt like he had died somewhere along the way.

———

"You know, he reminds me a lot of when you first joined." Nightmare said after the short skeleton had disappeared.

Nightmare couldn't help but wonder why Blue was so hesitant to just

talk. Nightmare had noticed that Blue was standing there, silent and shaking, fists clenched in some internal battle. And the longer he had, the more concerned Nightmare got.

"Normally, I would disagree with you on that. But I can see your point." Cross replied, spinning a butter knife on the table. However—and unfortunately, from Cross' perspective—Nightmare refused to let him drop the earlier subject, soon going back to arguing as he tried to get his subordinate to finish his plate.

———

Unluckily—and after much longer than Blue would like to admit—when he emerges with lukewarm crepes (that smelled mouthwateringly *amazing*), Nightmare and Cross are still sitting at the table. Even worse, Nightmare spots him immediately and pulls out the chair next to him, motioning for Blue to take a seat.

And he can't just... say no.

So instead, Blue swallows his fear (or at least attempts to) and sets the plate down next to Nightmare's. The other's plate is almost empty, with only a few more bites left.

On the other side of Nightmare, Cross had been muttering bitterly as he slowly chewed on his toast. Blue isn't able to make out much, only a few words. And what he does get is confusing without context.

Cross glances at him, and Blue realizes he'd been staring. He drops his eyelights and focuses on inhaling his food and getting out of there. (The thought: *'What were you thinking? Useless!'* crosses his mind more than a few times.)

Meanwhile, Nightmare, satisfied with Blue, turned back to Cross.

"Listen, I know that he's there. And I know that you want him gone." Nightmare whispered, causing Blue to strain in order to hear him. "But that is *not* an excuse to skip meals, *especially* if he uses magic to maintain his form."

What did Nightmare mean? Was there more to Cross than he thought?

Instead of answering, Blue could see Cross nod out of the edge of his vision, the other's eyelights shaking unsteadily. Nightmare leaned in closer, almost touching Cross' skull. More whispering—of which Blue could only catch the word 'chocolate'—and Cross perked up, eating his breakfast with renewed vigor.

(He... couldn't take it anymore. Something in Blue clawed desperately angrily at the comparison of Nightmare and Dream. Ink always said that it was *Nightmare* who was cruel, that *Nightmare* was the neglectful one. But, that wasn't what he saw here at all.)

(*Why!?*)

Blue stood up suddenly, his plate clattering on the table and his fork dropping to the floor (he tried not to cringe internally at the wasted food still clinging to it). He resisted the urge to rub at the gathering tears, instead focusing on teleporting back to his room (he could no longer go back to his room with Dream and Ink. Blue's SOUL still beat with a muddled feeling at the thought).

And in a moment, he was gone.

Blue slumped against the inside of his heavy wooden door, frantically wiping at his eye sockets. His chest shook, wracked with the sobs he couldn't suppress.

This was stupid, *he* was stupid.

———

Unfortunately, Nightmare couldn't be everywhere at once.

Which is why he had to remember to check on Blue later. *Soon, but later,* he promised (to Blue or himself, he didn't care enough to find out). In the meantime, he ducked into the kitchen for Cross' promised chocolate bar. When Nightmare walked out, he saw Cross scarfing down the rest of his eggs and toast, lighting up afterwards when he saw the offered chocolate.

Good. Cross can't be running out of magic, especially with XChara's return. (Which—while concerning—they'll work through.)

———

Nightmare started to get noticeably worried when Blue didn't come down for lunch. He wanted to give the other space, he probably needed it, but at the same time Blue can't be sacrificing his own health for it.

Which is exactly why he was carrying a tray up to Blue's room. It wasn't anything special, only a couple sandwich variations really, as Nightmare didn't know what his preferences were yet. He knocked on the door, shifting the tray behind his back with his tentacles.

"Blue? It's a bit past lunch. Do you want to come down for food?" No reply, other than a few muffled noises that were probably words from the other side of the wood.

Nightmare sighed, bringing the tray back into his hands. "I'm not gonna drag you downstairs, so I brought up a plate of sandwiches."

He smiled slightly after hearing the latch for the door click. "Only eat what you like; ie, you are *not* allowed to overeat."

The wood creaked ajar, and Nightmare saw Blue's tired eye sockets. He handed the tray over before turning around and walking away.

"I can also bring up dinner, if you would prefer." He called after him.

———

That wasn't necessary—as Nightmare came to find out. Blue came down about a half hour before dinner was supposed to be ready, tray in hand. (A quick glance suggested that Blue followed his orders, as three sandwiches were left untouched.)

Blue blearily mumbled a greeting at Nightmare before walking into the kitchen. The goopy monster could hear the water turn on as Blue (most likely) washed his own dishes. He also wrapped the leftover food, Nightmare found later.

Ah, he had forgotten to tell Blue. It was Dust's turn to wash tonight. (He also needed to add Blue into the chore rotation. *Another day, after he's more settled in.*)

When Blue came back out, he tiredly sat at the dining room table. Nightmare pulled out the chair across from him, quietly settling his tentacles behind him. Killer sat next to him, throwing and catching a knife repeatedly as he waited.

"Error said he will be done with dinner soon," Nightmare said, picking up and spinning a steak knife in his phalanges. "He's making his best tonight, carnitas."

Blue jumped up at this, blinking away the tiredness under his eye sockets. "Really? I love carnitas!"

Nightmare smiled softly. "I'm glad. Which sandwiches did you end up eating?"

Blue processed the question for a few seconds, sitting down and

tapping his gloved fingers on the table.

"I couldn't tell exactly what was in some of them, but I really liked the tuna ones. Oh! And I loved the avocado sandwiches. Though, I didn't really like the turkey that much. Like, who puts mustard and turkey together?? I wish I didn't have to spit it out, but it was *disgusting*." Blue's eyelights turned into stars midway through the ramble. Though, once he remembered who he was talking to they immediately disappeared and he quickly shifted, becoming more closed off and quiet.

Hmmm. Nightmare didn't like the signs he was getting.

"...I-I mean—I'm s-sorry I wasted the food you gave me. I shouldn't have done that, and I won't in the future."

Next to him, Killer shot Nightmare a look which translated to: "that's a yikes from me, bro".

However, before Nightmare could say anything, Killer spoke up. He regarded Blue with a slightly amused expression, brow raised, as he tried to stay casual. "Is it really a crime to have preferences? Like, honestly man. Are you saying that you can't dislike something because it's wasting food?"

Blue paled (as much as a skeleton could, anyways). He stammered, trying to explain his, quite frankly, broken logic. When Blue couldn't come up with anything, Nightmare shook his head and stopped it there.

"I am not angry at you, especially not for something like this. And I never *will* be angry at you for having your own preferences. Remember that, Blue." He nodded, avoiding both of their gazes.

"Y-Yes Nightmare."

———

That night, Blue couldn't sleep.

He kept seeing faces in his dreams, people he couldn't help, people who were alive one moment then dead the next, Dream, Ink, and—as if it couldn't get any worse—he now saw Nightmare's disappointed face too.

Deciding enough was enough, Blue crept out of his room for a walk. To clear his mind, to get some water, whatever. He just needed to get

away.

The halls were sparsely decorated, letting the deep indigo wallpaper be seen. The decorations that were on display were grand and clearly expensive. Classical paintings, chandeliers, statues of monsters and myths. Blue found himself infatuated with them as his phalanges ghosted the figures.

Who owned them before? What feelings went into making them? Were they about legends and epics long forgotten, or about battles and sacrifices that have been lost to the sands of history?

Blue didn't know the answer, he suspected he never would. And, for some strange reason, he didn't feel upset at the notion.

Blinking, Blue found himself in a moderately spacious room, most likely lost. (Had he really been that deep in thought?) Looking around, there were couches and armchairs scattered throughout the carpeted room, a few of them accompanied by ornate tables. The lounge perhaps?

More importantly, there was someone *else* in (what he decided was) the lounge at this ungodly hour. Or rather, a few someones. Blue silently padded closer to Nightmare, who in turn had his tentacles curled around what looked to be... Horror?

As he got closer, he found out it was indeed Horror. The red-eyed skeleton was clutching at the hole in his head, tugging on it harshly and muttering.

He was repeating the same things over and over again, seemingly in the throes of a panic attack. "*...Still hungry, hurt, not me, hungry, hurt, it hurts, don't hurt me, I'm still hungry, not me please...*"

Blue felt bad for him, wishing he could help (as well as quietly wondering how this came to be). Instead, Nightmare—who was still by Horror's side—was slowly rubbing circles in the other's back. His hand lit up (as well as his eye light, if the added illumination of the room was anything to go off of), glowing a soothing blue-ish purple.

"Sleep. It will be okay."

And with those words, Horror slumped into Nightmare's tentacles, unconscious. The glow disappeared, and the room was cast into the same dim light as before. Standing up—and carrying Horror with his tentacles—Nightmare turned around and locked eye lights with Blue.

Nightmare didn't seem surprised to see Blue when the latter jumped in shock. Nightmare only raised his brow in a silent question.

"Ack! Sorry I didn't mean to intrude o-or anything!! I was just wandering because... because..." Blue trailed off, not wanting to admit that he had a nightmare (as ironic as it was). After all, he never went to Dream or Ink if he had trouble sleeping, why should that change?

Nightmare didn't say anything for a while, scrutinizing Blue silently under a cyan gaze.

"You want to know how I could be so different from what you've seen on the battlefield, right?"

Blue stuttered, suddenly finding the soft beige carpet at his feet incredibly interesting. He *has* been silently asking that, though it was only one question among many. Eventually, he found his words.

"Yeah. I-It's been on my mind a bit." Understatement of the year. Blue forced himself to look back up at Nightmare.

The nightmare king sighed, gently setting the sleeping Horror down on one of the nearby couches and sitting next to him. Nightmare gestured for Blue to take a seat as well. He complied, though with a moment's hesitation.

Nightmare sighed, long and heavy, like the air itself had a weight on him. "It is because, a long, *long* time ago, that's how I... *did* treat them. I cannot take back my actions, and I regret it. And while I can never truly make it *right*, I can ease their suffering in the meantime. I can treat them better than the past has."

Nightmare shook his skull, as if it was covered in cobwebs and he was trying to free himself. "And as I changed, how I used to act became more of a... facade of sorts. To keep my—to keep Dream, and later Ink, from becoming suspicious. It stuck, and, well, now here we are."

Blue nodded solemnly. It made sense, almost. But still...

"Can I ask another question?" Blue suddenly said.

"You mean besides the one you already asked?" Nightmare chuckled as Blue resisted the urge to roll his tired eyelights. *Now I see where Killer gets it from.* "Sure, within reason."

Blue opened his mouth only to close it. What *was* he going to say? He

had so many things to ask that he didn't even know where to start.

(*Why change? Why take me in? Why didn't I do this sooner? Why offer a fresh start? Why think that anything can change in the first place? Why are you better than Dream? Why are you better than Ink? Why do I enjoy being a bad guy more than being a good guy?*)

"*Why?*"

His phalanges shot to his mouth, eye sockets going wide. He didn't mean to actually say it!

"Why?" Nightmare paused for a moment, thinking. "I suppose because I finally recognized that I cared about them all, each and every one of my subordinates. I realized that I didn't *want* to be hurting them. Even though it was the only thing I knew back then. I didn't want to be the same as those they had known before. I didn't want to be a backstabber or a liar anymore. I didn't want to be a *villain* to them anymore."

Blue nodded, barely managing to process his words. Though one thing rang in his head, echoing like a bell.

"Even though it was the only thing I knew back then."

———

It had been several days since Blue had joined Nightmare's gang, bordering on a week, in fact. And while he was getting used to the way everyone worked, there were a lot of things he still didn't get.

Mostly hobbies, and the general selfishness that everyone, except for him, seemed to have. Blue never had time for hobbies, time for *himself* back when he worked with Dream and Ink. It was perplexing to Blue, almost disconcerting if he really thought about it.

And Nightmare kept making him question whether it actually was *selfish* to want time for yourself: to have hobbies and to *relax*. Nightmare even encouraged it! He scheduled days off for the gang and personal time. It was like Blue had been suddenly immersed in an entirely different multiverse.

Conversely, Nightmare had been persistently telling him that it was okay for him to take time for himself, and that he wasn't like Dream. Though, it still didn't feel *right*.

So in the meantime, Blue focused on getting through his upcoming

missions until he could figure this all out. He can't let his feelings get in the way of work, after all. Because, in only a few hours, Blue would be on the field again. For the first time since coming to Nightmare's castle.

Against the very skeletons he used to be allied with.

———

"Blue? Why would you do this! I thought we were friends!" He winced at Dream's words, trying not to cry.

Ink also stared at Blue as if he was a human with two heads, or a disfigured bug under his feet. "We thought you were a good person! Why would you join Nightmare? Especially after everything *he's* done!?"

Blue wanted to scream, to dig a hole and disappear, to chew out Ink and Dream for lying all those years. He wanted closure answers, goddammit!!

However, he froze, time moving slowly and agonizingly. The war hammer trembled in his hands as his ribcage became heavier by the moment. Out of the corner of his eye, Blue could see Cross glance between him and what was left of the Star Sanses.

"Okay listen up!" Blue's eyelights snapped to Cross, who had stepped forward to deal with Ink and Dream after seeing his teammate unresponsive. "It doesn't matter *why* he joined. That's for him to know and tell at his own discretion. What *matters* is that we are fighting and this is a battlefield."

Shakily, Blue nodded, breaking out of his trance and stepping forward. He raised his war hammer, knowing just how powerful it can be in his hands. In his peripheral vision, Blue could see Cross shoot a rare smile at him.

"Exactly, I'm especially not going to spill my guts whilst we're fighting. *Now move*, you're in our way." He snapped, trying to ignore Dream's heartbroken look. (He looked just as Blue felt, terrified and scared and on the verge of crying his eyes out.)

Ink on the other hand shrugged, as if he wasn't really surprised, only disappointed. Anger flared in Blue's SOUL, his grip on his weapon tightening. (*Why?* He wanted to scream. *Why can't you force yourself to care!?* Though, he didn't have the heart to keep asking the same question, especially one he already knew the answer to.)

Instead, he prepared for battle. Calculating where the Star Sanses were going to attack first. They were no longer his team, they were no longer his friends.

Dream and Ink were now his enemies.

———

Blue limped into the infirmary, hoping it was just a twisted ankle and nothing more. Cross sat on a cot, scotting over to make room for his teammate. Blue jumped onto the spot that Cross had made for him, the two of them sharing the cot.

"You did really well out there! Though, I'm not sure what else I expected from a former Star Sans." Blue chuckled slightly at that, despite the pain.

"Yeah, I'm just glad nobody got too hurt–" Blue cut himself off before he could add the "*on both sides*" that was on his (non-existent) tongue.

Cross nodded, either not noticing or being gracious enough to not comment on the way his sentence ended. "Definitely, I can't believe you jumped into that ink trap for me." Cross snorted, "Don't let Nightmare see you doing that, by the way. He doesn't appreciate martyr complexes all too much."

"Oh." Was all Blue could say. *He didn't have a martyr complex, right?*

Cross shook his head, appearently reading Blue's thoughts. "Don't worry about it. I'm just glad that the worst injury today was yours."

Blue only nodded, not daring to talk.

———

Luckily, as it turns out, Blue didn't sprain his ankle in the ink trap. Dust said that it was going to be sore for a few days, but other than that he'll walk it off unscathed. Blue thanked the stars for that, as he didn't want to be put out of commission on his first day. (And in the meantime he'll just have to deal with the pain.)

Speaking of meantime, Cross had promised Blue that he'd show him around. First, the two visited the gardens—which, surprisingly, were run by Horror. Apparently the skeleton had a green thumb and an affinity for cooking.

Blue enjoyed listening to Horror ramble about the process of sowing plants and taking care of them. It was interesting, the amount of work

it took to grow enough food that was both rich in magic and could feed the entire gang.

The red-eyed skeleton also showed Blue his flower garden. It was beautiful, and completely blindsided him. He never expected it, honestly. (But... he wasn't entirely opposed to these layers of his new teammates, for some reason.)

Next, Cross dragged him to the kitchen. It seemed like everyone in Nightmare's gang (except for Blue) knew where the others were all the time, because when the two walked through the wooden arch that separated the kitchen from the dining hall they almost ran into Killer. He was dashing from counter to counter, mixing ingredients and consulting a huge bound book every once in a while.

Blue watched in astonishment as Cross casually walked up to Killer, unfazed by the latter's going-ons. "Hey man! What're you making?"

Killer, chipper and without missing a beat, responded: "Pineapple upside down cake! Error found a recipe in this AU he was tearing up and gave it to me!"

Cross jumped onto an empty space on the counter, making sure his long scarf stayed out of the unmixed ingredients. "Isn't that like, really hard to make or something? I could've sworn I heard that somewhere."

Killer nodded. "Yeah, it's mostly because the pineapples and cherries that are baked in are, y'know, fruit. That, and it's harder to control. You also have to grease the pan well in order to flip the cake in the first place. But! I'm not there yet, so I'll worry about that later."

Cross nodded again, smiling even wider and Blue couldn't help but stare. He didn't know why he was caught off guard by the fact that they all had hobbies, time for themselves. (And, well, the only reason he could come up with for *that* was his own lack of hobbies.)

Cross silently beckoned Blue over, patting the counter on the other side of him. The space was empty. Hesitantly, Blue stepped around Killer's rushing and onto the counter as well.

"I..." He didn't even know what to say, so he just went with the obvious. "I didn't know you baked, Killer."

The skeleton in question beamed, enthusiastically tapping his foot to a rhythm that Blue couldn't hear. "Yeah! Cross suggested I pick it up, he said something about me having a "natural talent" or whatever."

Cross laughed, "it's true, you're very good at it!" Blue nodded. He didn't know much, but he has eaten some of the pastries that were offered after dinner and, suffice to say, they were *divine*.

Blue felt the tension in his bones ease. Chuckling, he added: "Man, I didn't know you guys had so many secret hobbies. Is there anything you *don't* do?"

Killer hummed thoughtfully at this, multitasking on the recipe and Blue's question. "I mean, we don't do *everything*, per say..."

Uh oh, they were taking the question too seriously.

"Yeah," Cross said, winking at Blue. Oh stars he was doing it on purpose. "But I get what you mean, though."

He continued on, distant while thinking of examples. "I do know that Dust is training himself on medicine and healing magic, and of course everyone knows that Error knits and crochets. Nightmare is an avid reader too. Though, that last one isn't very surprising—considering the size of the library and all—but still."

Blue nodded, intrigued enough to forget his earlier embarrassment. "And what do you do Cross?"

He looked taken aback, as if he didn't expect Blue to even ask. "Oh–" He thought for a bit. "I guess... I guess I usually tend to the armory? Sharpening weapons, restoration, that kinda stuff. It's calming."

Killer raised an eyebrow, silently shooting a look at Cross. Blue couldn't catch what it did, but it certainly said *something*, as Cross lit up and jumped off the counter—pulling Blue along with him.

"I forgot one other thing I need to show you!" Was all he said, leaving much to be imagined. Killer called after them as Cross dragged a helpless Blue outside.

"Don't have too much fun! I still need someone to taste test this cake!"

——

Thunk.

A knife sunk deep into the wooden target, surely killing it if it was alive.

Turns out Cross also practiced knife throwing—which is where he had

dragged Blue off to. Cross said it was to test both your skills and your weapons, which were incredibly important in combat. (And needed to be kept in top shape.) He also claimed that it was fun, which Blue was inclined to agree with.

It was good stress relief.

Blue threw hard, making sure to line up the point of the knife with the throat of the wooden mannequin. It landed almost dead on, slightly to the left. He smiled, Cross clapping him on the back.

"Good job man! You picked this up fast!"

Blue panted, slightly exhausted but ultimately feeling better. "Thanks, I never thought I'd be good with knives like you and Killer are."

Cross summoning a few glowing red knives in response. They hovered in a semicircle around his outstretched palm as he grinned. "I guess you could say that you learn from the best."

"I'll make sure to tell Killer that, I'm sure he'll appreciate it." Blue shot back, tongue in cheek. The other paled (as much as a skeleton could, at least), before dismissing the red weapons.

"Now hold it buddy, this is how you repay my help? I taught you how to throw knives!"

Blue laughed, smiling widely. "Maybe you can teach me a bit more and I'll keep quiet."

Exasperated and rolling his mismatched eye lights, Cross tugged Blue along, taking him to another part of the combat yard. "Yeah, yeah, I'll show you around more."

After a few more training exercises and a small break (in which Cross vanished to the kitchen for some of the now-complete pineapple upside down cake), Blue was finally introduced to the archery range.

It was tiny and unassuming, nondescript amid the chaos of the rest of the combat yard. Cross extrapolated as Blue stared in wonder. "Nobody really uses it, though we have some arrows and I can probably find a bow in good shape."

He ducked into the small dilapidated shed at the edge of the target field, with Blue following close behind. Meanwhile, Cross muttered to himself, "I don't even remember who built this in the first place. It's

been so long since a new member joined and all, especially since it took a while before anyone showed *me* around. But that's besides the poi—aha!"

After digging through the shed, Cross emerged with a compound bow. It creaked slightly with disuse, but was in otherwise fine condition. "How much do you wanna bet that Error found this in an AU and brought it back?"

Blue snickered, "You know he'd be more likely to just destroy it rather than bring it back."

"I suppose so. Do you think anyone here's a kleptomaniac then?"

"Dust, maybe?" Cross laughed at that.

"I'm certainly not going to poke around and find out."

Humming, Cross pulled the bow's drawstring back, finding he couldn't quite make it to his cheekbone. "Huh, I hope you're strong enough to use this—seeing as we don't have tools to loosen it."

Seeing Blue's look, he quickly added: "And trying to do it on your own would be asking for trouble, not to mention extremely dangerous."

Nodding, Blue took the bow, determined to show Cross wrong. "Well, we'll see that I really am stronger than you!"

He pulled it back, and back. Finally, he got it to the full length, holding it for a few moments. Slowly, he led the string back to a resting position, making sure not to release it without an arrow.

"Wow that was... Not as hard as I expected it to be." Cross shrugged at this.

"I guess you're just better at pulling a bowstring than I am."

"Or maybe you're just weaker than me." Blue giggled at the look Cross shot him, exhilarated. He always wanted to try archery, but he could never force his magic to form into a bow of his own, nor would Dream let Blue borrow his. Plus, he never had the time—a recurring and daunting theme.

Cross playfully punched his shoulder. "Okay, big shot. Wanna give it a try, then? We'll see if your bite is as good as your bark."

Unfortunately, before Blue could snark back, Cross suddenly jumped

up, and looked towards the castle.

"...I gotta go," He said with a hint of worry in his voice—or was it urgency? "Something's up. Don't worry about coming along, I think I should be able to handle it myself."

As he turned to leave, Cross must have remembered something as he stopped before turning around towards Blue. "You know how to nock an arrow right?"

Blue hesitated, *did* he? Something in his mind told him he'd be alright.

Blue nodded, and Cross sighed in relief. "Great, just remember that the odd colored fletching on the arrow goes out and away from the rest of the bow. Good luck!"

And with that he was gone, leaving Blue to himself and his excitement to start archery.

———

As Blue studied the compound bow and the few arrows that Cross had managed to dig up, he wondered how it would feel in his arms. He was fairly sure he got everything, as he remembered Dream teaching him a few things back when he first joined. (Back when they had time to hang out as just friends. Back when things were better.)

He remembered a few of the steps; first, you make sure your posture is correct. You turn ninety degrees to the target, so your left side is lined up with it instead of your chest. And then...

Well, Blue couldn't quite remember the rest, but he's fairly sure it consisted of nocking your arrow and shooting at the target. Simple, maybe even easy if he was feeling overconfident (which he wasn't, but still).

A deep breath to settle his nerves. *I can do this. It's a new thing, I might fail, but I can do this.*

Stepping up to the faded white line that had been painted on the wild grass, Blue checked his posture. Feet shoulder width apart, left shoulder pointing to the target. He pulled an arrow out of his pocket, making a note to find a quiver. Nocking an arrow, Blue made sure the odd colored fletching was on the outside of the bow string, just like Cross had said.

Blue pulled back the string, not struggling much to make full use of

the bow's power. Last but not least, aiming. He lined up with the target, willing his arm to stop shaking. After a few moments, he felt that he had done all he could. Now all that was left was the hard part.

Letting go. Taking the plunge into something new.

(Why was he so afraid of something new? Was it because he would have to finally admit to himself that it was better here than with his friends? Though, Cross was his friend. And so was Killer, and Horror. And so were all the rest of Nightmare's gang. He felt at home with them, yet missed Ink and Dream at the same time. Was that even okay? He wanted to stop thinking, he wanted to stop asking questions so bad. But it only got better with questions. He only learned more with the incessant '*why*'s and '*how*'s.)

(Why is he so afraid then?)

Blue closed his eye sockets. A deep breath. And another. And his phalanges let go, launching the arrow forward with explosive power.

...

It felt like forever as the arrow moved, inching closer to the worn styrofoam target. Blue could almost count the seconds as time moved in slow motion, even though it took less than one.

Finally, a *thunk* as the arrowhead (and shaft) sunk into the target. Hesitantly, Blue opened his eye sockets, scared at what he might see.

———

Cross came back from helping Nightmare with two cups of hot cocoa; one for him and another for Blue. It was almost dark outside, which concerned him. He was hoping that Blue hadn't been overexerting himself or something.

Luckily, it didn't seem like anything was wrong when he saw Blue in the archery field. As Cross got closer, he was smiling. And, wait—with dried tear tracks running down his cheekbones? He only shook his head at this, knowing that he really shouldn't ask.

"Hey, Blue!" Cross said once he was close enough to his friend. He held up one of the cups of hot cocoa in greeting instead of waving, not wanting to risk jostling the hot drink.

Blue jumped at his voice, turning immediately, on edge, but smiling once he saw who it was. "Hey Cross! What're you doing out here? I

thought you had something you needed to do."

At this, Cross raised his eyebrows. He quickly glanced at Chara, as if asking *'Did I hear that right?'*. Chara only shrugged, being unhelpful, *as usual.* (What else did he expect, honestly?)

"It's been at least four hours dude, what do you mean??" At that, Blue narrowed his eyelights at Cross.

"But..? It hasn't been that long right? I was only practicing a bit more because archery's been really fun to do and—" He started to ramble, leaving Cross to cut him off.

"Stop, I know where this is going. C'mon, let's head inside and we can talk there, it's getting cold out." He suddenly handed Blue his cup of hot chocolate; drowned in marshmallows, just as Nightmare had advised him. "Dinner's gonna be ready soon, now that the Boss is feeling better."

Blue had been staring at the ground, trying to get the gears in his head to start up again. When Cross shoved the hot porcelain into his phalanges, his gaze snapped up. "Wai—what? Something happened with Nightmare?"

Cross waved it off with his now free hand, "Later. Go put your bow away and I'll catch you up."

As Blue bounded to the archery shed, being careful not to spill his drink—Cross nursed his hot chocolate silently, watching him go.

'It's like looking into a mirror. Y'know that, right?' Chara, arms crossed, floated past his peripheral vision. Cross tried not to roll his eyelights at him, but he couldn't resist.

Mostly because he really didn't want to acknowledge the kid—there was too much animosity between them right now—but also partially because he was right.

———

At dinner (in which Nightmare had made curry, rice, and naan bread), Blue felt so tired. He didn't have the energy to talk to anyone, he didn't even have enough to eat more than a few bites.

Unfortunately, a certain goopy skeleton noticed his erratic behavior.

Nightmare kept shooting Blue looks that easily translates into *'eat your*

food' and *'what happened?'*. Concern, another emotion that Blue wasn't used to seeing his not-so-new boss display.

But he just felt empty, drained—*exhausted*. (Though he ate a few more spoonfuls of his curry at Nightmare's prodding.) He was stuck in a loop of his thoughts, most of them wondering, all of them questions.

And the main question he still had was *'why?'*, although for a different reason this time. Unfortunately—or fortunately, depending on the way you look at it—now he was stuck on asking why he felt so elated. And exhausted. And so many emotions in-between.

Mostly tired and excited, though.

After a while of stewing, Blue eventually came to a conclusion that he was satisfied with, one that Nightmare would be proud of him for coming up with. (Jeez, when did he start looking for *Nightmare's* validation of all monsters? Whatever.)

Anyways, he had simply settled on the fact that he had found a habit of his own. One that he hadn't been given room to find and explore on his own before.

It felt... nice. Blue could sense the tension in his jaw ease with the simple realization. He wasn't just a cardboard cutout minion, and he was worth more than his battle tactics and blue attacks.

Blue was himself for the first time in... a while. And suddenly the fatigue seemed to vanish as joy blossomed in his chest.

He started eating again, though with renewed vigor. And this time when Dust tried balancing a butter knife on his phalanges and failing miserably for the upteenth time, Blue collapsed into snorts and giggles. (Blue definitely didn't miss the mixed look of what *appeared* to be pride and relief from Nightmare.)

———

Blue bolted upright with short breaths. His eye sockets were heavy, but as his eyelights darted around in a panic, he couldn't find it in him to close them again.

Nightmares. Nothing new.

Luckily, Blue had the next day off. (Actually, he was really lucky—as when he glanced at the clock it read 4:27AM with bright, analog letters.)

Blearily, Blue managed to fumble out of his bed and into the grand halls of the castle. He didn't bother to even glance at the paintings and odd trophies that Nightmare had collected over the years. All he had on his mind was a cup of hot chocolate and a heavy blanket from the infirmary.

(A perfect recipe to bury the same terrors he'd been seeing most nights. An eldritch combination of scattered memories and his worst fears; wearing ever changing masks to keep Blue on his toes.)

The last thing he expected was to walk into the kitchen and find Dust one step ahead of him—steaming mug in hand at the long table. Immediately, the other skeleton noticed Blue. Nervously (and with tired eyes), he waved at Dust, hoping he didn't disturb him too much.

Dust only nodded, and gestured for Blue to take the seat directly across from him.

For a few minutes, the two wordlessly avoided each other's gaze. Until, finally, Dust slid his mug across the table and in front of Blue's hands.

Startled, but curious, Blue asked: "What's this?"

Dust rolled his shoulders uncomfortably, shooting a glare at the empty air besides him. Blue easily ignored it. " 's a cup of apple cider."

Blue only raised his brow at this, and the other hurriedly explained that it was just a hot drink. "No alcohol or poison in it, I swear."

With that, Blue was satisfied and started to nurse the mug between his phalanges. It was warm, and the pleasant heat seeped into his bones; it trickled some much needed relaxation into his SOUL.

After a few more moments of awkward silence, Blue spoke. "Why're you up?"

He laughed, but the sound had no warmth to it and it echoed hollowly. "Can't sleep tonight, just one of those days. Bro has been really buggin' me."

"'Bro'?" Blue asked, but Dust only shook his head.

"Don' worry about it. 'S not important."

Blue rolled his shoulders uncomfortably, unsure what to do. "If you

say so."

Suddenly, before he could stop himself, Blue spoke: "Why don't you ask Nightmare for help?"

Dust laughed, genuinely, and it was a *much* better sound than before. It brought life into the skeleton who looked like he had just risen from the grave two seconds ago. Though, Blue quickly realized that Dust was laughing at what *he* had said, and he could feel his cheekbones light up with a slight blue.

"Don' wanna bother the Boss tonight. He had a rough day yesterday and I jus' wanna give him some space an' all." Dust said after his fit died down. " 'sides, I can deal with it on my own just fine."

Blue nodded quickly, hoping to finish the conversation before he can say *more* embarrassing things to Dust. Said skeleton apparently felt like making the interaction even worse for Blue because he turned the question on the asker.

"Why don't *I* just go to Nightmare?? I—well–! It's more complicated than that!!" Blue protested indignantly, but it didn't seem to convince Dust any more.

"And why not? You're a part of this team no more than anyone else is. If we can, but you can't, wha's the difference? Are you somehow not important enough for help?"

Blue only glared into his apple cider, the cloudy liquid becoming increasingly interesting by the second.

"C'mon, don' be like that. 's nothing to be ashamed of, having problems. Hell, ev'ryone here's got *plenty* of baggage."

"*Fine.*" Blue muttered through gritted teeth. He tried to relax his jaw, to let go of some of the tension. It only barely worked.

"I guess..." When he trailed off, Dust silently gestured for him to continue. "I guess that I'm just afraid of being a burden. To you, to Nightmare, to everyone. You guys are my friends and..."

He powered through, forcing himself to spit it all out.

"I'm afraid of losing you guys like I lost Ink and Dream."

———

Blue sat in bed, still trying to process the last 30 minutes. He had told Dust a lot of things on his mind, mostly his own self doubts.

And the worst part is, he didn't even feel that bad about it. He felt *relieved*, lighter, even.

Their parting words still stuck in Blue's mind.

"Hey, Blue?" Dust suddenly asked, eyelights nervously flicking between the other skeleton and the empty space next to him. His brother, perhaps?

"Yeah, Dust?" Blue replied instead.

"If you ever need to talk to someone, we're all here. An' I don't just mean Nightmare. Talk to any of us, an' we'll listen, promise. You won' be a burden to us."

They echoed in his head, and everytime they did he felt more tears stain his cheek bones.

Blue slowly sunk into his bed and under the covers. He turned over, though still thinking about his conversation with Dust.

And finally, Blue drifted off to sleep, a reply on the tip of his tongue.

——

Blue was practicing archery when Cross ran up to him. He released the arrow—almost hitting the bull's-eye—before turning to his monochromatic friend.

"What's up Cross?" He didn't answer, as he was doubled over panting, like he'd ran through half the castle (which was not an easy feat).

"You uh, you need a moment?" Blue asked instead, giggling slightly. Cross nodded, and Blue nocked another arrow.

(Nightmare had 'talked' to Blue about not overexerting himself or burning himself out with archery. Meaning he basically threatened him.)

Cross stood straight, and Blue turned to him, again. "Blue, the Boss wants you to meet him in the library, ."

His posture became stiff, almost nervous. What would Nightmare want with him? He asked the same of Cross, and the other just shrugged.

"I honestly can't tell ya, sometimes it's a gamble y'know?"

Blue could only nod.

———

Walking into the library, Blue stared in awe at the sheer amount of books the, frankly, enormous and grand room held.

Shelves lined the walls, and went all the way to the open ceiling. Instead of a roof, the sky was visible through intricate glass that formed one giant skylight. The room was several stories tall, with multiple floors to allow the residents access to each and every book. Blue knew the library—built at the center of the castle, as to be the most fortified from a siege—was probably the biggest room, but he had severely underestimated just *how* much bigger it was.

There were rolling ladders attached to each wall of bookshelves, a pattern which continued as you went up. The floors above only housing more shelves. Said shelves were embedded into the wall, with wide balconies jutting out and giving plenty of walking space.

On the ground floor there were many armchairs and tables for reading. Several lamps lit the room in a warm orange glow. The grand room had a cozy atmosphere with the main color and the wallpaper being a deep navy blue.

Nightmare clearly had taste, though Blue never really doubted that.

Reminded of why he was here in the first place, Blue started looking for the goopy skeleton in question. Eventually, he found Nightmare reading in an armchair near the back of the room. Which, it wasn't surprising that his boss was, well, *reading*. It was the library after all.

As Blue approached Nightmare, the latter looked up. His piercing cyan eyelight seemed to bore into Blue's SOUL, but Blue had quickly gotten used to it and the look didn't bother him anymore. (As Error had said on Blue's first day: *"I-It's just-st the wa-way his f-face looks."*)

"Blue, you came quickly." Nightmare commented, though it sounded more like a statement.

He stood straighter, "You requested me, sir." Blue couldn't help but hold his breath, waiting to hear what Nightmare had to say.

Instead, Nightmare sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I'm getting closer to marching up to Dream and punching him myself, *gods*."

Blue swallowed hard, hoping it wasn't his fault that Nightmare was angry. Suddenly, before he could say anything, his boss sighed again.

"Blue, I know what you're thinking. And I want to clarify this, right now. It's *not* your fault." Blue gaped at Nightmare, unsure why he was suddenly saying this. But, he wasn't going to stop him.

"What my idiotic brother has drilled into you will *never* be your fault." Nightmare continued. "So please, don't call me *'sir'* or anything like that; 'Boss' is already pushing it on its own." He spat the word *sir* like it was a rotten apple.

"And, Blue. Promise me you'll remember these two things." He nodded, Nightmare's eyelight cutting right through him and straight to his SOUL.

Nightmare held up a phalange before speaking. "First, we are more equals than not. I may be your leader, technically, but I'm also trying to be your friend. And I sincerely hope we can be friends someday, even with all the fighting in the past."

Another phalange, the goopy liquid dripping from his finger and sticking to his knuckles. "And second, you can always come to me. I won't care what it is, if you think I can help do not hesitate to ask."

Blue felt his (non-existent) throat close up, and tears threatened to spill over. "Thank you, Nightmare." He said thickly, almost tripping over his words.

Nightmare smiled; it was small and easy to miss, but fond and genuine.

"Great, I'm glad we got that out of the way. Now, the real reason I called you here is because I have another mission for you."

At this, Blue perked up. He has a new assignment?

"You, Killer, and Dust are to steal Ink's vials. Hopefully, with your knowledge of our enemy, Dust's affinity for sneaking around, and Killer's nature for being quick on his feet, you three will succeed."

Blue nodded quickly, excited by the prospect. "I won't disappoint you, Nightmare!"

———

Blue gasped and choked, feeling blood and magic clogging his mouth.

He tried to stand, again, and collapsed back onto his knees, *again*. He could feel the AU around him crumbling, threatening to collapse in on him just like his legs had.

Ink and Dream were waiting for them, somehow. And their chain of skirmishes had left a trail of shattered AUs behind.

Killer and Dust were still fighting Ink, Dream having left hours ago to attempt some semblance of damage control on the AUs caught in the crossfire. They were holding their own fairly well, but they were also clearly on the losing side. They were tired, *exhausted*, even. And they couldn't keep this up forever, unlike Ink.

Blue staggered *again*, and he felt bile rise up into his mouth. He tried not to retch.

The AU shook, it's edges showing cracks that only Out!Codes could see. Ink looked up at the sky, expression blank. This pause only appeared for a few moments before he disappeared into an ink portal under his feet.

"Killer, Dust! Go after him, you can still find him before he gets away!" Blue shouted, desperation carved into his words. He can't fail, he just *can't*.

Both Killer and Dust turned to Blue when their names were called, looking at him like he has suddenly sprouted two more heads.

"And what? Leave you here!?" Killer said quickly, completely ignoring Blue's desperate look.

"Dude, we're *not* doin' that, no way in hell." Dust added, rushing with Killer to help their injured teammate up.

Blue clung to both of them like they were lifelines (which, considering the situation...). They slung his arms around their shoulders—Dust on his left and Killer on his right.

"Why... didn't you go... after him..?" Blue managed to choke out. Killer only shook his head and Dust got a look like he wanted to slap him.

"Again, and just leave ya here? This place is a tickin' timebomb and you clearly can' make it out on your own!" Dust yelled at Blue, he turned to Killer.

"Make us a portal, and quick! This place ain't gonna hold much longer,

and I used all my magic in that fight back there." Killer nodded, doing as he was told and summoning an out for all three of them to limp through.

They did just that, collapsing into a pile on the infirmary floor.

Blue was the first to recover, his head spinning violently as he sat up. He could feel the anger (and fear) boil over as he threw all logic out the window.

"What the hell was that for Dust!? We almost had him, we were *so close*. If you just would've gone after him—"

"You would've found a way out yourself!? Blue, I don't care how strong you are, you wouldn't've been able to just *'walk it off'*!" Killer had sat up as well, and was now waving his hands around wildly at Blue's words.

Dust groaned and shuffled slightly on the floor but otherwise didn't stir. He did, however, start berating Blue. "Your life ain't worth some dumb paint dumbass!"

Blue growled in frustration, exasperated. "It wasn't about the dumb paint Dust!! It was about the advantage we would gain from crippling Ink like that! Do you not get that??"

Killer butt in, just as fueled as the other two. "Of course we get that Blue! That's why Boss sent us on that mission in the first place. What *you* don't get is that you are worth more than the possible advantage we'd get!!"

Then, he suddenly stopped shouting, the black goop running from his eye sockets dripping heavier than it had been before. "Don't you see that we care for you? That you shouldn't treat yourself like this? What if Ink has more vials, and you died back there—it wouldn't've even been worth it in the end."

Finally, Dust added the last nail in the coffin, his voice barely above a whisper. "There's always next time, there's always another mission. But there isn't another Blue like you, not exactly. And there never will be."

———

Blue ran down the creaky wooden stairs, hoping that neither Dream nor Ink (especially Ink) had noticed his absence the past hour.

Unfortunately, it didn't seem that luck was on his side, as he skidded to a stop right in front of Ink, who stood in front of the shared house's door with crossed arms.

"What took you so long to get ready, Blue? You're normally much faster than this." Blue tried to stutter out an excuse that wasn't 'I overslept again'. It never worked though, and this time was no exception.

Ink scoffed at Blue, looking down on the smaller skeleton. "Need I remind you what we're fighting for? Nightmare and his gang never rest, and neither can we. In fact, Nightmare treats his underlings worse *than this, simply because he can! This is nothing compared to the suffering that others have to face."*

Blue shrunk back, making himself look as small as possible.

Ink continued his rant, not caring that his teammate looked more and more heartbroken with every word. "Don't you know how selfish it is for you to do this? It's like you don't even care about all the people that need our help! You complain about needing to sleep and eat, when many of those that we save hardly get half of what you get!"

He was fine with just letting Ink say this, because it wasn't all that different from what he usually said when Dream wasn't (and even sometimes when he was*) around. But this time around, something in his SOUL woke up, and it woke up* angry*. And it was so angry that he couldn't even quell it like he had in the past.*

Blue stood taller, almost coming to that same height that Ink was. "It's not my *fault that I can't run around for days without a break! It's not fault that I need more than just* paint *and* emotions *to survive. And Ink, trust me when I say that I wish I could be like you two—I really do sometimes! But I'm not!! And you need to stop belittling me for eating some* fucking *food sometimes!!"*

Blue looked Ink in the eyelights, daring him to snap back. And for a few moments, it seemed like the entire world held its breath with Blue, waiting to see what the soulless guardian would do.

Instead, Ink only laughed. "Oh Blue! I know you can do better than that. You just aren't trying hard enough! You've been much better in the past, and I really don't see why you're changing or making such a big deal out of it." His voice was sickly sweet and it made Blue squirm internally, he felt like bugs were crawling inside his bones—or like he was a deformed animal on display at a menagerie, an oddity that you watch with disgust and curiosity but never touch, never empathize with.

"Listen, Blue—" Ink grabbed Blue's cheekbone, cupping it and making the gross wriggling feeling even worse. *"If it's too much for you, just leave! We certainly aren't keeping you here, after all."*

Then Ink let go, suddenly turning and walking out of the house. However, before he left completely, he called after Blue, pushing him to tears.

"Just know that if you do leave, it's because you simply couldn't handle it, and that you were too weak for even the easiest jobs we gave you!"

Blue startled awake, his eye sockets shooting open and a scream on the tip of his tongue. He panted heavily in his bed, the blankets tangled around his bones and ensnaring him. He struggled to free himself from the sheets, their tight closeness causing more panic to bubble in Blue's SOUL.

Finally, with a dull thud, Blue unceremoniously fell onto the rug next to his bed, free of the heavy blankets. He scrambled away from the bed, still trying to think through the panic-filled haze that had settled over his not-yet-conscious mind.

Eventually, one thought won out of all the ones that were battling in his head. *Run. Get away. Anywhere but here.*

So that's what he did. Blue sprinted past corridors and hanging tapestries, past long stretching halls and cracked paintings. None of it registered, nor did he know where he was going, if he was going anywhere specific at all.

That's when the haze lifted for a moment, which was all he needed. Blue immediately recognized that he was in the dining hall, and that there was a very confused Horror staring at him with his bright red eyelight, hand on the edges of the hole in his skull. And somehow, seeing Horror brought Blue out of his panic-induced state.

It was familiar, seeing Horror here. Blue couldn't help but think about his similar encounter with Dust.

Taking a deep breath, Blue took a seat across from Horror (who looked like he needed the company). He shivered slightly, but ignored it when Horror finally spoke.

"Are you... okay? It looked like you were havin' a pretty bad panic attack when you came in."

Blue laughed, the sound hollow and devoid of substance. "You could

put it that way."

He hummed, drumming his fingers on the long wooded table. "So, what're you up for?"

Horror chuckled dryly at this. "The same reason as you, probably."

Blue smiled tiredly; he should've expected this answer to be honest. "Then why don't you talk to Nightmare about it?"

The other skeleton regarded him for a few seconds, before he broke out in quiet laughter. "Again, I could ask the same for you."

"You don't want to bother him?" Blue tried instead, having a feeling the two were up for similar reasons.

"Somethin' like that I suppose..." Horror leaned forward in his chair, slumping onto the table slightly. He softly gripped at the hole in his head (*a coping mechanism, perhaps?* Blue couldn't help but wonder).

"I guess I just... needed a distraction, 's all." Horror continued after a while, and he nodded in turn, knowing the feeling all too well.

"How's this for a distraction then?" Horror shook his head at that.

"Pretty lousy distraction, if you ask me."

"Oh? Okay, well... how about we change the subject to somethiiaaAAH—!" Suddenly Blue interrupted himself with a shriek as he jumped from his chair. One of Nightmare's tentacles had poked his shoulder without warning, startling Blue.

Horror only winced at the loud noise, and Blue whispered a quick 'sorry' to him before turning to Nightmare, who was still behind him from earlier. "Please don't sneak up on me like that, Boss."

Nightmare sighed, giving both of them an apologetic look.

"Anyways, what are you doing down here this late?" Blue asked when Nightmare didn't say anything.

The goopy skeleton only shrugged, "I had felt a lot of night terrors tonight, and I was doing rounds to see if anyone wanted my help."

Blue nodded, and Horror groaned. "Thank the gods," The latter said. "I definitely wasn't up to making the trip to your room, both mentally and physically."

Nightmare only nodded, teleporting to Horror's side of the table in the blink of an eye and softly (with warning) placing his phalanges on the other's skull.

"Just sleep, no dreams, correct?" A nod from Horror, and his eye sockets slowly slid shut under Nightmare's sleep magic.

Blue thought it was utterly *fascinating*, even through the layers of exhaustion and sadness and perhaps some lingering of panic.

Horror slumped into Nightmare's arms, the latter easily passing off the unconscious monster to his tentacles. They wrapped securely around Horror, keeping him from falling to the ground. Nightmare then turned to Blue, now that he was satisfied with Horror.

"Do you want me to do the same with you? I promise that it won't hurt, only dreamless sleep."

Blue shook his head at Nightmare's offer, as much as he trusted his boss, he didn't want to go back to sleep. He just wanted to *talk* with someone. Blue repeated as much to Nightmare, and the other hummed thoughtfully.

"I am not one to deny what makes my team comfortable." He started walking out of the dining room and into the halls, gesturing for Blue to follow along. "Come along, I need to put Horror to bed."

Blue, feeling a bit lighter already, rushed to catch up with Nightmare. As they walked, his boss tried to ask Blue about his night terror, but he only avoided the questions. Eventually, Nightmare dropped them entirely for other discussion topics like the histories of the paintings that he had stolen collected over the years.

Finally, it was almost an hour later—with Horror in bed and sleeping soundly—when both Nightmare and Blue arrived at the latter's bedroom doors.

"Do you want to keep talking?" Something in Nightmare's eyelight made Blue want to say yes. He mulled it over, wondering if he really wanted to open up to him.

A part of Blue that was tired of all the walls shouted *'yes!'*, another part of him struggled violently to leave the walls up, arguing that nobody could ever know or he'd be weak. But that part didn't win—it couldn't—and Blue invited Nightmare inside.

The two sat at the small coffee table that was in the room, both drawing up a chair. And as they sat down, Nightmare tried one last time, probably out of desperation.

"What was your nightmare about, Blue?" Nightmare asked, his rumbling voice low, baritone almost.

And for a few moments, Blue really thought about the question. *Did* he want to tell Nightmare? Strangely enough, he couldn't find any reason not to, like the part of him that usually protested had finally grown tired of hiding behind walls too.

So he did, Blue told Nightmare everything.

Blue gave a rather long winded explanation to the other, curling in on himself more and more with every word. He didn't even realize he'd started crying until he was wiping away the tears that ran from his eye sockets.

And when he finally looked up at Nightmare, the other seemed chilled to the bone, unsettled in a way that Blue hadn't ever seen.

"This was Ink, correct?" Blue nodded, tears still running down his cheekbones. Nightmare's expression soured, but quickly turned back into concern.

He then wrapped his tentacles around Blue as the latter started to cry his heart out. Nightmare hugged Blue, keeping him secure and warm for the entirety of Blue's sobbing. And eventually, when he fell asleep, Nightmare brought Blue to his bed, gently pulling the blankets over him.

"Sleep well, Blue. And..." Nightmare hesitated, unsure if he should even voice the last of his thoughts.

"Thank you for trusting me. I promise that things will get better."

———

The war hammer still felt heavy in Blue's hands. Though, instead he held it up proudly and prepared for battle.

There was a weight on his SOUL, but it ached with only a dull pain, pulsing with every hit the enemy took. A far cry from the stabbing agony it used to be.

It hurt because what Dream and Ink did was wrong, it was absolutely

horrible. And it hurt because of how long it took Blue to realize that fact. But that was okay. Nightmare, Cross, Killer, Dust, Horror, and Error: they were all helping him realize that. Each and every one of them.

Blue smiled. He was still getting better, and some days were better than others for sure. But in the end, he was far better off than before. And he wouldn't trade this newfound freedom—his new friends and hobbies for anything.

Especially not for his old life with Dream and Ink.

End Notes

This fic was a surprise and also tiring lol. I spent so much on this fic it's not even funny anymore!

Also this was actually written before sanguine (lmao) so like,,, this was my first time finishing a fic with so. many. words. (No joke, I literally had to make a checklist of everything I wanted to include in this fic.) It was a fucking trip, all in all

This whole thing was just random but it kinda consumed my whole life for like, the last half of my 9th grade year haha. I hope that this fic gave you at least one gut punch :)

Until then, see you around! There's a ut hsau on the horizon, so be sure to watch for that @w@

Works inspired by this one

[Restricted Work] by mortus_ (mortuscunningham), mortuscunningham

Building your own Emotional Intelligence Toolkit with Blue by Hstaya

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!